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Willean Intertextuality

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## An Accurate Description of What Has Never Occurred: Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and Wildean Intertextuality

Any attempt to argue for the influence exerted by Oscar Wilde upon the dramatic works of Brian Friel will be a challenging (albeit rewarding) prospect. Friel's plays, with their predominant focus upon Irish nationalism and rural Ireland, would seem to be far removed from the epigrammatic and English drawing room-centred works of Wilde. However, when one adopts an intertextual approach to reading Friel's drama, the extent of his partiality towards the Wildean oeuvre becomes much more discernable. In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality as the passing of meaning from a writer to a reader through the mediation of 'codes' that are derived from other texts.<sup>1</sup> The use of the word 'code' by Kristeva implies a much more subtle form of influence than simply quoting another author's work directly. It points towards one writer borrowing from and alluding to another in an implicit manner that can at times be hard to detect. The presence of Oscar Wilde's works (more specifically his essays and *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*) as intertexts in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* shall be the driving argument of this article.

In the production notes for his 1988 play, *Making History*, Brian Friel partially quotes a passage from Oscar Wilde's essay, 'The Critic as Artist':

To give an accurate description of what has never happened is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of arts and culture.<sup>2</sup>

This quote differs from the original only in its use of the word 'happened' as opposed to 'occurred' and it locates the precise area of Wildean dogma that Friel found so attractive:<sup>3</sup> How lying can be used as a powerful artistic tool. The argument that Wilde's work held any appeal for Friel would once have seemed a strange contention since Friel had previously dismissed Wilde as not being worthy of canonical status in the annals of Irish literature.

In a 1972 essay, entitled 'Plays Peasant and Unpeasant', Brian Friel gave the following assessment of the Irish dramatic heritage:

It is time we dropped from the calendar of Irish dramatic saints all those playwrights from Farquhar to Shaw — and that includes Steele, Sheridan, Goldsmith and *Wilde* [my italics] — who no more belong to the Irish drama than John Field belongs to music, or Francis Bacon to Irish painting ... we can go back no further than 1899, to the night of 8 May, the opening night of the Irish Literary Theatre.<sup>4</sup>

This statement is certainly unambiguous concerning Friel's position regarding the pre-twentieth century playwrights such as Wilde. Friel is clearly saying that these authors do not belong in the Irish dramatic canon and that Irish playwrights of the present should look back no further than 1899 for artistic inspiration. It is arguable that Friel's denouncing of Wilde as a writer worthy of inspiring Ireland's new generation of playwrights might stem from the fact that Friel felt an anxiety about the shadow that Wilde cast over his work and wished to indirectly deny that link between himself and Wilde. If that is the case, then Friel was experiencing what Harold Bloom called 'The Anxiety of Influence' in his book of the same title. Bloom outlines this experience in the following passage that seems very relevant to Friel's essay:

[I]nfluence anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by the story, novel, play, book or essay. The anxiety may or not be internalized by the latter writer, depending upon temperament and circumstances, yet that hardly matters: the strong [work] is the achieved anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

One could also argue that, because of the work undertaken by critics such as Rodney Shewan and Daniel O'Hara in the seventies and eighties which illustrated Wilde's modernity and worthiness for serious study, when Friel came to stage *Making History* in 1988, Wilde was deserving of mention as being a source inspiration for succeeding generations of Irish authors.<sup>6</sup> These works argue that Wilde was an important influence on the theoretically sophisticated ideas of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. While Friel's drama has been read through the lens of the aforementioned thinkers, his debt to Wilde has been largely unexplored, despite Wilde's noted anticipation of many of the theories associated with Derrida, Barthes, and also George Steiner (whose work is so often linked with Brian Friel's art).<sup>7</sup> F.C. McGrath has argued that Wilde has indeed been a very influential figure for many of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century: 'Wilde was one of the first since Berkeley to give an Irish character to the epistemology that eventually produced the linguistically sophisticated philosophies of thinkers like Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault'.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that Friel seeks to disengage himself from authors such as Wilde and Shaw, the essay in which he does so takes its title partially from two collections of plays by Shaw: *Plays Pleasant* and *Plays Unpleasant*. Thus, Friel is engaging with one of the authors whose influence he intended to renounce. Although Friel has misremembered Wilde's quote from 'The Critic as Artist', his usage of such an extensive passage from Wilde indicates a clear awareness of, and partiality to, the Wildean literary corpus.

It is arguable that the foundation of the Field Day theatre group by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea in 1980 may have been the catalyst that enabled Friel's wild(e) side to become more overt in his work. In 1982, Friel spoke of how Field Day intended to create an 'artistic fifth province'<sup>9</sup> in Ireland and this statement of intent revealed the Wildean nature of both Friel and the whole of the Field Day project. Field Day sought to merge art and politics in a way that had not been in Ireland since the Irish Revival of the early twentieth century and Wilde's theories were the perfect inspiration for such a project. Lawrence Danson's observation: 'The Wildean critic neither knows nor feels the world, but makes it',<sup>10</sup> implicitly (albeit unintentionally) links Field Day with Wilde since they both used art to recreate a flawed reality in more utopian forms. The fact that it was physically impossible to have a fifth province in Ireland would not deter a Wildean artist such as Friel from attempting to make one through the medium of art. *Faith Healer* — a play produced one year before the founding of Field Day — is the first of Friel's dramas that seems to exist in an artistic realm separate from physical reality and thus is an important precursor to the Field Day project.

In 1972 (ironically the same year that Friel rejected the importance of Wilde in 'Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant'), Friel wrote an essay entitled 'Self Portrait' in which he indirectly demonstrated his partiality to Wilde's belief that events that never occurred can be accurately described when they are told with enough conviction by a man of arts and culture. This essay relates a supposedly factual account of a day that Friel spent with his father, an event that is similar to one described in Friel's 1964 play *Philadelphia Here I Come*:<sup>11</sup>

We are walking home from a lake with our fishing rods across our shoulders. It has been raining all day long; it is now late evening; and we are soaked to the skin. But for some reason, perhaps the fishing was good — I don't remember — my father is in great spirits and is singing a song and I am singing with him. And there we are, the two of us, soaking wet, splashing along a muddy road.... But wait. There's something wrong here. I'm conscious of a dissonance, an unease. What is it? Yes, I know what it is: there is

no lake along that muddy road. And since there is no lake my father and I never walked back from it in the rain.... The fact is a fiction. Have I imagined the scene then? Or is it a composite of two or three different episodes? The point is — I don't think it matters. What matters is that for some reason ... this vivid memory is there in the storehouse of the mind.... For me it is a truth. And because I acknowledge its peculiar veracity, it becomes a layer in my subsoil; ultimately it becomes me.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we see that, whether it is ultimately accurate or not, this story is a pivotal one for Friel because of the compelling way in which he remembers and relates the event: both to himself and his readers. Art and memory are thus interwoven in this account to the point that they become indistinguishable.

In 'The Decay of Lying' Wilde makes the distinction between higher and lower forms of lying: 'The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake ... those who do not love beauty more than truth can never know the inmost shrine of art'.<sup>13</sup> In 'Self Portrait', Friel reveals himself as being a liar in the Wildean model: Someone who can disregard fidelity to facts for the sake of compelling and powerful storytelling without descending into the less elevated practice of lying for advantage. Friel showed in 'Self Portrait' that he was an embracer of beauty rather than truth because his essay related an event that was as beautiful as it was untruthful. Thus, going by Wilde's argument, Friel proved himself worthy of passing into the innermost shrine of art and further demonstrated his worthiness seven years later with the creation of *Faith Healer*.

That *Faith Healer* is a work about art and the artist is, by now, an undisputed fact. Friel admitted as much when he gave the following assessment of his play: '[*Faith Healer*] was some kind of metaphor for the art, the craft of writing.... And the great confusion we have about it ... I mean the element of the charlatan that there is in all creative work'.<sup>14</sup> This metaphor for faith healing as an artistic enterprise is emphasised by Frank Hardy in the early stages of the play when he refers to his gift as 'A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry'.<sup>15</sup> This description draws a perfect link between the faith healer and the artist since both are in possession of a talent that is unpredictable and indefinable. Frank's wife, Grace, leaves the audience in no doubt as to what she perceived her husband as being when she is asked what his profession was and she emphatically states: 'He was an artist'.<sup>16</sup> I would argue that, not only is Frank an artist in the general sense of the word, but through his deliberate desire to fictionalise existence and render fact indeterminate, he can be categorised as being a specifically Wildean artist.

*Faith Healer* is a play that perfectly conforms to what Wilde believed art should be: '[a] purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent'.<sup>17</sup> The challenge for all the audiences that have attended the productions of *Faith Healer* down through the years is that what they are presented with for the play's duration are the oral testimonies of three characters that are constantly contradicting each other. Thus, the audience cannot possibly gain an insight into what is 'real' and what is fiction. I would argue that none of these monologues represents 'the truth' of the play but that all are beautifully told lies that are so compelling as to force the viewers to willingly believe each one as it is being spoken. The characters who speak to us during the play have gained perfect mastery of their natural gift for exaggeration and the result is that *Faith Healer* becomes a linguistically protean text.

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde gave the following definition of a perfect lie: 'What is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence'.<sup>18</sup> In Wilde's view, lies are perfect when there is nothing to prove that they are not the truth. The liar does not need to demonstrate that he has been truthful; all that is needed is for no evidence to exist which will contradict his version of events. For this reason, the stories in *Faith Healer* have equal status because there is nothing to prove any of them to be factually accurate. Almost all the events that are described separately by Frank, Grace, and his cockney manager Teddy undercut and contradict each other.

The legal status of Frank and Grace's relationship is rendered very uncertain since Frank tells his audience that Grace is his mistress while according to her, they are married. Teddy also claims that Frank and Grace are husband and wife and that 'The Way You Look Tonight' was played at their wedding. Ultimately, however, like so many parts of this play, as Anthony Roche has noted 'there is nothing finally to provide ultimate verification, nothing but the words as spoken on the stage [and how these verbal utterances are spoken]'.<sup>19</sup>

Frank tells a story of how his mother had a heart attack and he got word of this while he was in a village 'called Kinlochbervie in Sutherland, about as far north as you can go in Scotland'.<sup>20</sup> He then describes how this death provided the occasion for a tearful reunion with his father. This story is called into question by Grace who tells us how: 'We were in Wales when he got word of his *father's* [my italics] death.... And when we got back he spoke of the death as if it had been his mother's'.<sup>21</sup> Although Grace demands to be regarded as the voice of accuracy we cannot know for certain who is to be believed. Ultimately, it should not really matter because both versions are told with such conviction and power that we cannot help but believe them both. Frank's version in particular is very moving because he evokes

for his audience a beautiful moment of reconciliation with his father. All of these stories could be fictitious but they hold great significance for the people who remember them. Neither Frank nor Grace can prove that they are telling the truth but their audience is forced to take both of them at their words in the absence of more definitive information. In essence, if they are telling lies, then their falsehoods are, according to Wilde, the perfect kind because they are their own evidence.

In 'The Truth of Masks', Wilde made the following assertion concerning the relationship between art and truth: 'For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true'.<sup>22</sup> *Faith Healer*, with its contradictory monologues, is one work of art that embodies these words of Wilde. The character of Teddy is the spokesperson for the play's extremely flexible attitude towards what constitutes truth in art when he offers his explanation for the constant arguments between Frank and Grace:

All right you could say ... the only thing that finally mattered to him was his work-and that would be true. Or you could say it was because the only thing that finally mattered to her was him — and I suppose that would be true too. But when you put the two propositions together like that ... somehow they both become only half truths.<sup>23</sup>

This description of Frank vaguely echoes 'The Truth of Masks' with its uncertainty concerning the viability of 'absolute truth', certainly when it comes to art. Teddy is demonstrating how, in the world of the artist as liar, half truths are perhaps the closest you can get to an actual fact. This may also help to explain a certain contradiction that emerges in *Faith Healer* concerning Friel's own view of the nature of art because at certain times during *Faith Healer* he is suggesting that art is a random and inexplicable entity, while at others both Frank and Friel exhibit a strong degree of calculation and planning with regards to the usage of their gifts. Wilde's own views on art can also be seen as contradictory because his essays at one moment argue for the irrationality of art and at others describe it as a calculating entity that can refashion existence. It is arguable that both Friel and Wilde wish to make a virtue of inconsistency by refusing to yield to an absolute definition of art and instead putting forward what they regard as half truths concerning the nature of art and the artist.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the character of Algy gives voice to a conception of 'truth' that is highly nuanced: 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility'.<sup>24</sup> For Algy, truth need not be overly concerned with facts because, although a lie

may be factually inaccurate, it can nevertheless be expressive of a truth for the person who is speaking. Algy contends that nowhere is this more evident than in modern literature which he regards as being in existence solely for the purpose of subverting facts but championing truth. In *Faith Healer*, Brian Friel has created a work of modern literature that confirms what this Wildean character believes with regards to the function of art in the modern age. Friel's characters seem to feel that they are speaking an inner truth concerning their lives while at the same time probably being utterly unfaithful to fact. Frank's story concerning the reconciliation with his father may have no fidelity with fact, but it does express a truth with regards to his desire to reconcile with his father. In 'Self Portrait', Friel regarded the event that he describes as taking place between himself and his father as representing some truth about their relationship despite the fact that it probably never occurred. This is the reason why Friel says that the story has become him. Thus, both Wilde and Friel pose interesting questions concerning whether truth and fact are truly interdependent. Wilde once observed that 'all people are good until they learn how to talk'.<sup>25</sup> What he is insinuating is that when people learn to speak, they enter into a relationship with the unreliable and potentially treacherous medium of language which is a very pertinent idea in the context of *Faith Healer* where it is possible that all the characters are speaking nothing but falsehoods whether they mean to or not. Teddy is the character in this play who best illustrates how untrustworthy language is and how easily it can turn into a tool for lying, even if the speaker does not mean for this to occur. Although he should be the most reliable speaker of English since it is his first language, an incident near the end of his monologue casts doubt upon his ability to use verbal English to communicate truth. When he is giving evidence at the trial of the men accused of murdering Frank Hardy, by his own admission:

Nobody in the courtroom understands a word I'm saying — they had to get an interpreter to explain to the judge in English what the only proper Englishman in the place was saying! God!<sup>26</sup>

From a Wildean perspective, Teddy's encounter with an Irish courtroom shows how unreliable and potentially untruthful the medium of language can be. Since no one that is present in court is capable of understanding what Teddy is saying, the potential for being betrayed by language is present from the moment he opened his mouth. The fact that Teddy is an Englishman speaking to an Irish audience also suggests that language is a cultural construct rather than a means for absolute truths to be communicated across all boundaries.



Perhaps the most important instance of contested narrative in *Faith Healer* concerns Frank and Grace's stillborn baby who was birthed in their van in Kinlochbervie in Scotland. This tragedy is recounted by Grace and Teddy but is not mentioned by Frank. In Frank's version, Kinlochbervie is a place of tragedy but only because it is the place where he heard of his mother's death. The two versions of the baby's death, as told by Grace and Teddy, differ at several key points. Grace's version gives a much more prominent role for Frank than Teddy's does. Grace describes how Frank 'made a wooden cross to mark the grave [of the baby] and painted it white and wrote across it *Infant Child of Francis and Grace Hardy*'.<sup>27</sup> She then recounts how Frank said a few prayers over the grave. In contrast, Teddy's version of events gives himself a far more pivotal role in the tragic events that overtook them in Kinlochbervie. According to Teddy, Frank walked away as soon as Grace went into labour in the back of their van and left Teddy to deliver the baby and look after Grace. Teddy insists that he was the one who 'made the cross and painted it white and placed it on top of the grave'.<sup>28</sup> He then goes on to say that: 'Maybe it's still there.... Who's to say?'<sup>29</sup> This question provides a perfect summation of the central message of the play. No one can possibly say which of these three narrators is telling the truth or indeed if any of them is. The most salient point to remember in this context is that while Teddy and Grace are recounting this very harrowing incident, they tell their stories so evocatively that their audience is completely convinced about the truthfulness of their tales. If they are indeed charlatans, they have at least given an extremely accurate description of what never took place.

Just as Wilde makes the distinction between different forms of lying in 'The Decay of Lying', so Friel does in *Faith Healer*. The fact that both Grace and Teddy speak of this tragedy in Kinlochbervie is significant since it gives added weight to their contention that this event did take place (although the facts surrounding the stillborn birth are still uncertain). This suggests that they are different types of fabricators than Frank. Although all three characters are perfect as artistic creations because of their service to the factual undecidability of the text, it is likely that Frank is the only character who actively fictionalises events. Grace and Teddy may misremember events but Frank seems to be a different and more intentional kind of liar. Thus, Frank is the only one of the three who has the potential to be a Wildean artist because his lies are deliberate and self-consciously creative while Grace and Teddy's seem to be less deliberate.

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde proposes the theory that the artist must recreate and remould the world that exists around him:

Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment.<sup>30</sup>

Frank Hardy, according to Grace, seeks to recreate and refashion Grace on numerous occasions:

One of his mean tricks was to humiliate me by always changing my surname. It became Dodsmith or Elliot or O'Connell or McPherson — whatever came into his head; and I came from Yorkshire or Kerry or London or Scarborough or Belfast; and he cured me of a blood disease.<sup>31</sup>

While this act of national misrepresentation of Grace by Frank may seem cruel from a human perspective, from an artistic point of view it is entirely admirable when we consider Wilde's assessment of true artistic activity. Grace's opinion as to why Frank constantly needed to reinvent her actually echoes Wilde's definition of true art: 'it was some compulsion he had to adjust, to refashion, to re-create everything around him ... it seemed to me that he kept remaking people according to some private standard of excellence of his own'.<sup>32</sup> Both Frank and Wilde regard life and nature as being defective and in need of refashioning and so they take it upon themselves to artistically remould the world and the people who exist in the world.

In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde writes that, in matters concerning art, 'all thought is dangerous'.<sup>33</sup> The reason given for this statement is that thinking about a work of art will make it into a fixed and stable object which will result in the removal of its boundless potential and ground it in the stagnant world of fact. In Wilde's opinion: 'There are two ways of disliking art.... One is to dislike it and the other is to like it rationally'.<sup>34</sup> In *Faith Healer*, Friel takes this warning about the dangers of thought on the part of the artistic critic and uses it to demonstrate how thinking can be detrimental for his artist/faith healer Frank Hardy. Although Frank clearly has the potential to be a great artist in the Wildean mould, his inability to forsake rational thought when approaching his craft proves to be a barrier to the full realization of his true potential for the majority of this drama. According to Teddy, one thing that all great artists, such as Sir Laurence Olivier, Houdini, and Charlie Chaplin have in common is that 'not one of them has two brain cells to rub together'.<sup>35</sup> Like Wilde, Teddy sees art as a mysterious commodity that cannot and should not be thought about because that would pigeon-hole it in the realm of the rational as opposed to the

mysterious. Because all of the artists that Teddy has mentioned do not, as he contends, burden themselves with intellectual activity, they are not able to say what 'it is they have, how they do it, how it works ... what it all means'.<sup>36</sup> For these great artists, art retains its mystery and its irrational qualities. In essence, it preserves its purity. What has held Frank Hardy back as an artist, in Teddy's opinion, is that he has devoted too much of his time and energy to analysing his gift. He has tried to bring it into the world of the 'real' by looking for it to yield tangible results. Because of this, Frank remained 'a bloody fantastic talent that hasn't one ounce of ambition because his brain has him bloody castrated'.<sup>37</sup>

In Frank's opening monologue, he himself admitted to his audience that he was tortured by the persistent questions that he was asking himself about his gift: 'Precisely what power did I possess? Could I summon it? When and how? Was I its servant? And is the power diminishing?'<sup>38</sup> These are questions that would be more applicable to a scientific experiment than an artistic talent and Frank Hardy is harming himself as an artist by trying to immerse himself in the world of the actual and the 'real' instead of accepting the distinction between the natural and the artistic. Like Wilde, Friel wants his audience to accept this distinction and realize that art has to do with the realm of the unreal and thus cannot be judged by rational standards.

Friel also never wants his audience to lose sight of the fact that Frank, Grace, and Teddy are artistic creations themselves as opposed to 'real' people. The unrealistic set design supports Friel's disavowal of realism in this play: '*Three rows of chairs — not more than fifteen seats in all — occupy one third of the acting area stage left. These seats are at right angles to the audience. On the backdrop is a large poster.*'<sup>39</sup> Also, by having his characters overtly address the audience through extended monologues, Friel is deliberately breaking the fourth wall between actor and audience and enhancing the viewers' awareness that the inhabitants of the stage are performers rather than natural people living 'real' lives.

At the end of Grace's monologue, she utters the mournful lament: 'O my God I'm one of his fictions too, but I need him to sustain me in that existence — O my god I don't know if I can go on without his sustenance'.<sup>40</sup> The unnamed male creator that Grace is referring to could be Frank, who, as Grace has already told us, has been shaping and reshaping her identity for years. Another argument is that Grace is speaking directly to her playwright creator, Brian Friel. She is acknowledging her fictional status within this very self-consciously unreal play. If this reading of the character of Grace is taken to its logical conclusion, it can be supposed that her offstage death was the result of Friel's ceasing to write about her. It was his pen and imagination

that gave her sustenance and when they were withdrawn, so was her life force.<sup>41</sup>

When Grace refers to the people that Frank tried to cure as being 'not real as persons, real as fictions, his fictions, extensions of himself that came into being only because of him',<sup>42</sup> Friel could have been writing about himself and his relationship to the characters on the stage; characters that never seem real as people, but as fictions, they are compulsively and magnetically watchable. While Friel's usage of his gift certainly does not have the same harmful effect as Frank's, it could be argued that Frank Hardy may represent what Friel regards as the dark side of art and the artist. If an artist is allowed to play god, then he does have the capability of inflicting harm on his (albeit fictional) characters. The creation of Frank Hardy may have been a cathartic experience for Friel because he was able to confront the less than savoury side of his own artistic identity.

In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde gives the following appraisal of modern journalism that further champions performative art over passive descriptions of reality: 'By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community. By carefully chronicling the current events of contemporary life, it shows us of what very little importance such events really are'.<sup>43</sup> Friel illustrates this negative view of journalism in *Faith Healer* when Frank Hardy reads out a newspaper concerning the night that he cured ten people in a small town in Wales called Llanbethian:

A truly remarkable event took place in the old Methodist church in Llanbethian on the night of December 21<sup>st</sup> last when an itinerant faith healer called Francis Harding ... cured ten local people of a variety of complaints ranging from blindness to polio. Whether these very astonishing cures were affected by auto-suggestion or whether Mr. Harding is indeed the possessor of some extra-terrestrial power ... we are not as yet in a position to adjudicate. But our preliminary investigations would indicate that something of highly unusual proportions took place that night in Llanbethian.<sup>44</sup>

This incident that took place in Llanbethian had already been narrated to us briefly by Grace and then in great detail by Teddy. Teddy's version of this miraculous event is particularly striking because of the beautiful and poetic language that he uses to describe how Frank's actions affected the people that he had cured: 'It was like as if not only had he taken away whatever it was wrong with them, but like he had given them some great content in themselves as well'.<sup>45</sup> This is in stark contrast to the much more clinical piece of reportage that was written

in the *West Glamorgan Chronicle* about the same event. The newspaper article takes away the sense of momentousness about what Frank Hardy did by attempting to hint at the possible rational explanation for what had occurred. The article also fails to capture the impact that Frank's healing powers had on those that he cured that evening. Ultimately, the journalistic piece only serves to diminish the importance of the event of which it seeks to give a perfect account.

The article's accuracy is also undermined when it refers to Frank's surname as being *Harding* as opposed to Hardy. (It must be noted that there is a certain degree of poetic justice in Frank's name being wrongly reported since he had supposedly called Grace by many different names when he introduced her to people). Despite the inadequacy of this piece of journalism as the insurer of his immortality, Frank carries it around with him for years as a means of reassuring himself that the event had occurred and was not merely a figment of his artistic imagination. As Frank said: '[The article] identified me — even though it got my name wrong'.<sup>46</sup> While this piece of journalism is not faithful to fact, it does serve one positive artistic purpose: It allows Frank to feel that a truth concerning himself and his identity has been expressed despite the lie or inaccuracy of the article. This points towards the distinction between truth and fact that both Wilde and Friel believe exists. However, Frank at this point in the drama is not yet fully confident in his ability to express the truth about himself personally and must rely on the objectifying and controlling words of others which is another barrier that he must cross before he can fully realise his artistic talent.

It is not until Frank comes back to Ireland and begins to have faith in his identity as an artist that he tears up this piece of reporting and throws it away. Frank is renouncing the world of the actual and the rational in favour of the more fantastic and inexplicable world of art. It was this dependence on the rules and the recognition of the 'real' world that harmed Frank's ability to fully realise his talent. He had been haunted for years by the constant need to understand his gift in terms that were not applicable to its ultimately unknowable nature: 'Was it all chance or skill?'<sup>47</sup> By tearing up the article, Frank is acknowledging that his abilities could not be summed up by the purely factual style of literary journalism because his abilities existed in a separate sphere to reality. By so doing, Frank recognises the distinction between the journalist and the artist that Wilde had articulated in 'The Critic as Artist':

[Journalists] chronicle with degrading avidity, the sins of the second-rate, and with the conscientiousness of the illiterate give us accurate and prosaic details of the doings of people of absolutely

no interest whatsoever. But the artist, who accepts the facts of life, and yet transforms them into shapes of beauty, and makes them vehicles of pity or of awe ... and builds out of them a world more real than reality itself ... who shall set limits to him?<sup>48</sup>

It is this recognition of the limitlessness of his own potential and his superiority to the people whose lives and actions can be encapsulated by journalists that propels Frank towards the creation of his final artistic work in the town of Ballybeg: his own death.

Frank's decision to attempt to cure the crippled McGarvey, knowing that failure to do so will result in his murder at the hands of McGarvey's friends, is yet another example of the artist in Frank attempting to defy and re-inscribe societal norms and codes. By effectively committing suicide Frank is undertaking a reevaluation of the event of death. As Jeffrey Cohen and Todd R. Ramlow have stated in their discussion of the suicide of Gilles Deleuze in 1995: 'Death is supposed to arrive from an exterior, unknowable, even mystical realm. We die when our time has come; we are not supposed to hasten death's arrival — event and body are, in this case, forbidden to form an alliance'.<sup>49</sup> Frank has effectively orchestrated his own demise in an artistic and dramatic fashion and refuses to submit to the chance of a natural death. Thus, he aestheticizes his own existence and makes his end an event of his own choosing. This assertion of control over his own fate is vocalised by Frank in the play's concluding lines: 'For the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent. At long last, I was renouncing chance'.<sup>50</sup> This statement marks the triumph of Frank Hardy as a supreme artist who chooses choice over chance. Essentially, Frank Hardy made his life a perfect work of art through his death. This strategy of making life into art and choosing death as a triumphant expression of the power of art connects *Faith Healer* with Wilde's story *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* and permits an examination of Friel's play through Wilde's prose work on several levels.

Near the beginning of *The Portrait of Mr W.H.*, Wilde (through his unnamed narrator) provides his readers with a way of regarding the text that is equally applicable to *Faith Healer*:

I insisted that [Chatterton's] so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *Faith Healer*, an attempt is being made to realise the personality of the artist outside the conventions of everyday life by the use of the imagination to create truth out of fiction. The works demand to be judged by their aesthetic qualities rather than by their fidelity to fact.

The structure of Wilde's story has certain similarities with Friel's play since both works centre around three narrators who relate and interpret the same story in different ways. Wilde's text has three characters giving their own version of the life of Mr. Willie Hughes, the man who they believe was the inspiration behind Shakespeare's Sonnets. This theory was originally expounded by Cyril Graham and then expanded on (with certain variations) by the other two characters. The power of Cyril's words was so great that, for the character of Erskine: 'Willie Hughes became to me as real a person as Shakespeare'.<sup>52</sup> This demonstrates how powerful and compelling language and stories can be. This is equally true of *Faith Healer* which is very much concerned with creating verbal pictures that become entirely real to the viewers who hear them.

The narrator of Wilde's story also becomes converted to Cyril Graham's theories and begins telling his own version of the life of Willie Hughes which, on certain key issues, differs from Graham's: 'Willie Hughes's abandonment of Shakespeare's theatre was a different matter, and I investigated it at great length. Finally I came to the conclusion that Cyril Graham had been wrong in regarding the rival dramatist of Sonnet LXXX as Chapman. It was obviously Marlowe who was alluded to.'<sup>53</sup> Thus, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* consists of three narratives that undercut and contradict each other to the extent that the concept of accuracy is rendered utterly untenable.

In *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* Wilde's three characters symbolise the different types of lying that Wilde refers to in 'The Decay of Lying'. Only Cyril Graham can be rightly regarded as the artist as liar since he revels in the artistic truth as opposed to the factual accuracy of his story concerning Willie Hughes. Graham deliberately falsifies events as Frank Hardy was to do more than a hundred years later in *Faith Healer*. In contrast, Wilde's unnamed narrator and Erskine, while they also may make factual errors in their accounts of the life of Willie Hughes, their errors seems to be born out of unintentional mistakes. Thus, they are more akin to Grace and Teddy than to Frank.

Erskine and the narrator in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* can be regarded as versions of the pre-Ballybeg Frank Hardy when he needed to carry a newspaper article about his exploits around with him in order to prove to himself that they really happened and thus mentally castrated him. Wilde's narrator and Erskine also required factual and documentary evidence that their theory about Mr. W.H. would stand

up to rational scrutiny. Therefore, they are not faithful to Wilde's archetypal 'artist as liar'. In contrast, Cyril Graham's only attempt to prove the validity of his story is to forge a painting of Willie Hughes. Graham believes that his tale, like all good works of art, is more answerable to the realm of falsity and forgery than it is to that of fact and evidentiary examples. Thus Erskine and the narrator of Wilde's story are denied the capacity to progress as Wildean artists. This progression is granted to Frank Hardy at the conclusion of *Faith Healer*.

Cyril Graham and Frank Hardy both become martyrs to art when they take their own lives (although the status of Hardy's death as suicide is slightly more implicit than Graham's). They both accept that their artistic way of perceiving the world is not compatible with the living sphere that they inhabit in life where reason and fidelity to the tangible is prized above blind faith and imagination. By taking his own life as an attempt to make people believe his (in all probability false) theory about Willie Hughes, Graham, like Frank Hardy, is renouncing chance in favour of a proactive approach towards reworking the distinction between truth and lies.<sup>54</sup>

In 1982, Seamus Deane, in a programme note for the Field Day production of Friel's *The Communication Cord*, outlined the shared ambitions of the Field Day directors and, by so doing, implicitly suggests a link between Field Day and *Faith Healer*:

If a congealed idea of theatre can be broken, then the audience which experiences this break would be the more open to the modifications of other established forms. Almost everything which we believe to be nature or natural is in fact historical; more precisely, is an historical fiction. If *Field Day* can breed a new fiction of theatre, or of any other area, which is sufficiently successful to be believed in as though it were natural and an outgrowth of the past, then it will have succeeded. At the moment, it is six characters in search of a story that can be believed.<sup>55</sup>

I would argue that *Faith Healer* can be read as Friel's dramatic realization of Field Day's aims before the organization was ever founded. In *Faith Healer*, Friel did breed a new fiction of theatre where stories did not seek to be regarded as truth but merely wished to be believed while they were being told. The stories of the past that are contained in the play are not histories but are historical fictions. Thus, it can be regarded as a possibility that *Faith Healer* was Brian Friel's artistic manifesto for Field Day and that his mission statement derived strongly from the Wildean aesthetic. When Deane refers to the founders of *Field Day* as being 'six characters in search of a story that can be believed', he is (possibly inadvertently) linking them with the three narrators in *Faith*



*Healer* who are also trying to tell their stories in a manner that will be believed by their audience. Although *Faith Healer* does not engage with the politics of Field Day in the same way as Friel's *Translations* (Field Day's first staged production) does, both plays are united by their depiction of lying as being in the service of an alternative artistic truth, and thus the two plays can be considered counterparts in the larger Wildean project that I regard Field Day as being.<sup>56</sup>

The next play that Friel wrote for Field Day, *The Communication Cord* (1982), continues the trend of Wildean intertexts being present in Friel's works. This drama can be read as a contemporary version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* set in Ireland. Both theatrical works, in addition to having a central character named Jack (which might, obviously, be coincidental), use absurdist comedy to deconstruct stable notions of language, identity, and rurality.<sup>57</sup> In 1988, Field Day staged Friel's *Making History*, which had (as has already been discussed) a lengthy quote from Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' as a production note. Thus, the Field Day works of Brian Friel can be regarded as continuing the debt to Wilde that is discernable in *Faith Healer*.

In *Faith Healer*, Brian Friel has created a play which manages to encapsulate the artificial, untruthful, wonderful, and liberating nature of art in a way that Wilde would certainly have approved. F.C. McGrath's assessment of *Faith Healer* testifies not only to its undoubted greatness, but also implicitly to it as the play of Friel's that most profoundly engages with Wilde's aesthetic theories:

In many ways *Faith Healer* marks the culmination of the development of Friel's stagecraft and of the evolution of his postmodern [Wildean] understanding of language as lying. No play written since *Faith Healer* has equalled its concentrated power and intensity nor matched the fineness of its writing. Although it is a difficult play to perform — it must be staged and acted superbly for it to work at all — it deserves to be ranked among the greatest plays of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup>

McGrath's contention that *Faith Healer* marks the point of Friel's fullest engagement with the link between art and lying implies that the play's greatness is inextricably linked with its usage of Wildean themes and intertexts.

While Wilde's influence on Friel is certainly not as immediately apparent as the debt that fellow *Field Day* director Thomas Kilroy owes to Oscar Wilde,<sup>59</sup> this article has argued that through the usage of intertextual analysis, Friel's debt to some of the works and ideas of Wilde begins to become visible. The reason why Friel turned to an author like Wilde for artistic inspiration rather than to more recent, and

more recognisably Irish, dramatists, may have been provided by Friel in a passage from 'Self Portrait' where he talks about how stable conceptions of Irishness have changed for artists of his era:

The generation of Irish writers immediately before mine never allowed this burden [of national and racial definition] to weigh them down. They learned to speak Irish, took their genetic purity for granted, and soldiered on. For us today the situation is more complex. We are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word 'native' means, what the word 'foreign' means. We want to know if the words have any meaning at all. And present considerations like these erode old certainties and help clear the building site.<sup>60</sup>

The issues of national and linguistic instability that Friel identifies as being important to him and his work are possibly what made Wilde's texts attractive to Friel because they pioneer subversive anti-fixity in relation to language and personal and national identity in a fashion commensurate with the best of Friel, and, most notably, in the case of *Faith Healer*. This passage from 'Self Portrait' anticipates *Faith Healer* because, in that drama, not only are identity categories destabilised, but the very words that represent them are undermined. Because *Faith Healer* is a theatrical work that is peopled by ghosts, it is somewhat appropriate that the spectre of Wilde should haunt the play — never quite being a visible presence but still discernable just under the surface.

#### NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.69.
2. Brian Friel, 'Programme Note for *Making History*', in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries and Interviews: 1964-1999*, ed. by Christopher Murray (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.135.
3. See Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994), p.114.
4. Brian Friel, 'Plays Peasant and Unpeasant', in *Brian Friel: Essays Diaries and Interviews: 1964-1999*, ed. by Christopher Murray (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1992), p.51.
5. Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1973, p.xxiii.
6. See Daniel T. O'Hara 'Prophetic Criticism: Oscar Wilde and His Postmodern Heirs', in *Contemporary Literature* 25.2 (Summer 1984), pp.250-259, and Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.250-259.
7. For a thorough analysis of Friel's usage of George Steiner's *After Babel* in *Translations*, see Richard Pine, *The Diviner: The Art of Brian Friel* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), pp.359-363.

8. F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post) Colonial Drama: Language, Illusion and Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p.19.
9. Quoted in Marilyn Richtarik, *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p.137.
10. Lawrence Danson, 'Wilde as Critic and Theorist', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.90.
11. See Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, in *Brian Friel: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp.94-95.
12. Brian Friel, 'Self Portrait', in *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries and Interviews: 1964-1999*. Ed. by Christopher Murray (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.39.
13. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994), p.1090.
14. Quoted in F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post) Colonial Drama: Language, Illusion and Politics*, p.173.
15. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer* (Meath: Gallery Press, 1991), p.13. All subsequent references are to this edition.
16. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.26.
17. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p.1078.
18. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p.1072.
19. Anthony Roche, "'The 'Irish Play' on the London Stage 1990-2004'", in *Players and Painted Stage*, ed. by Christopher Fitz-Simon (Dublin: New Ireland, 1995), p.139.
20. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.17.
21. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.25.
22. Oscar Wilde, 'The Truth of Masks', in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.1173.
23. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.40.
24. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.362.
25. Quoted in Declan Kiberd, 'Oscar Wilde: "The Resurgence of Lying"', *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.276.
26. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.45.
27. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.24.
28. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.43.
29. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.43.
30. Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p.1078.
31. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.24.
32. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.25.
33. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p.1072.
34. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p.1144.
35. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.34.
36. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.35.
37. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.37.
38. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, pp.13-14.
39. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.11.
40. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.32.
41. A fictitious character addressing her creator is a feature of Brian Friel's 1966 play, *The Loves of Cass Maguire*, in which Cass takes issue on several occasions throughout the course of the drama with the title of the work as chosen by Friel. See Brian Friel, *The Loves of Cass Maguire* (Meath: Gallery Press, 1992), p.23.
42. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.25.
43. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p.1145.

44. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.50.
45. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.38.
46. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.50.
47. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.13.
48. Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p.1145.
49. Jeffrey Cohen and Todd Ramlow, 'Pink Vector's of Deleuze: Queer Theory and Inhumanism', *Rhizomes* 11/12 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), par. 18.
50. Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, p.55.
51. Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, in *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.302.
52. Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, p.308.
53. Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, p.320.
54. I am grateful to Frank McGuinness for suggesting this very fruitful comparison between *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *Faith Healer*.
55. Quoted in Marilyn Richter, 'The Field Day Theatre Company', *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama*, ed. by Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.191-203. For an account of the aims, objectives and productions of Field Day, see Marilyn Richter, *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Catholic University of America Press, 2001).
56. For a more comprehensive analysis of the influence of Wilde on *Translations*, see Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), pp.410-412.
57. See Brian Friel, *The Communication Cord* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).
58. F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post) Colonial Drama: Language, Illusion and Politics*, p.177.
59. See Thomas Kilroy, *Double Cross* (Meath: Gallery Press, 1994), p.35; *My Scandalous Life* (Meath: Gallery Press, 2004); and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (Meath: Gallery Press, 1997).
60. Brian Friel, 'Self Portrait', p.45.